

Donkeys in Ancient Egypt

By

Venice Ibrahim Attia



The scientific name for the donkey is (*Equus asinus asinus*, *Equus africanus asinus*), thus the donkey is a domesticated member of the horse family (Equidae) where the wild ancestor of the donkey is the African wild ass (*E. africanus*).

height ranges between 79 to 160 cm, and working donkeys in the poorest countries have a life expectancy of 12 to 15 meanwhile in prosperous countries, they may live between 30 to 50 years.

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Perissodactyla
Family:	Equidae
Genus:	Equus
Scientific Name:	Equus Asinus
Type:	Mammal
Diet:	Herbivore
Size (H):	90cm - 130cm (35in - 51in)
Weight:	200kg - 258kg (441lbs - 570lbs)
Top Speed:	24km/h (15mph)
Life Span:	15 - 30 years
Lifestyle:	Herd
Colour:	Grey, Brown, Black
Skin Type:	Fur
Favourite Food:	Grass
Habitat:	Arid forests and deserts
Main Prey:	Grass, Weeds, Vegetables
Predators:	Fox, Wolf, Lion
Distinctive Features:	Stocky body and hee-haw sounds

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Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Perissodactyla
Family:	Equidae
Genus:	<i>Equus</i>
Species:	<i>E. africanus</i>
Subspecies:	<i>E. a. asinus</i>
<i>Equus : africanus asinus</i> Linnaeus, 1758	

Donkeys vary in size depending on breed its weight ranges between 80 to 480 kg

Scientific classification of donkey

Male donkey or ass is called a jack, a female a jenny or jennet and a young donkey is a foal, a jenny is normally pregnant for about 12 months giving birth to a single foal, thus twins births of donkeys are rare.

In our modern world today The Domestic Animal Diversity Information System (DAD-IS) of the FAO listed 189 breeds of ass with about 41 million donkeys found worldwide, abundant in various parts of the world as shown in the following table:-

Region	No. of breeds	% of world pop.
Africa	26	26.9
Asia & Pacific	32	37.6
Europe & the Caucasus	51	3.7
Latin America & the Caribbean	24	19.9
Near & Middle East	47	11.8
North America	5	0.1
World	185	41 million head

Number of breeds and percentage of world population for each of the FAO's world regions in 2006

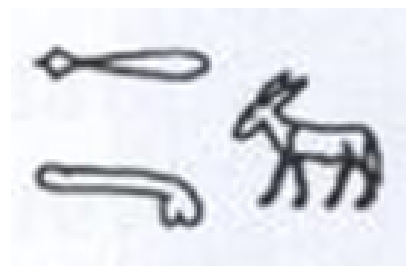
Donkeys were first domesticated around 5000 BC, in Egypt or Mesopotamia, and spread around the world, thus donkeys

appear in Egyptian tombs about 5000 years ago (Clutton-Brock, 1992), pointing to their main use pack transportation. Domestication of donkeys took place after the domestication of cattle, sheep and goats propably during the seventh and eighth millennia BC by Egyptian Nubians.



Donkeys

The donkey was the most important load carrier as well as people in Ancient Egypt. Ancient Egyptians domesticated donkeys over 5,000 years ago, the donkey in ancient Egypt was about (1.2 meters) high weighing about (272.16 kilograms) ie much larger than our modern donkey. It was called (Aa-hemet or Eeyore) in Hieroglyphic.



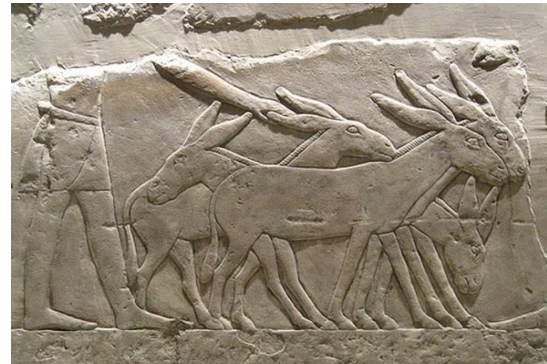
Donkey in Hieroglyphics



Donkey in an Egyptian painting c. 1298–1235 BC

Donkeys were allowed to roam in herds, watched over by a herdsman, and it is documented that during the Ramesside times the temple of Amen alone had 11 million donkeys on its lands, knowing that female donkeys were kept as dairy animals.

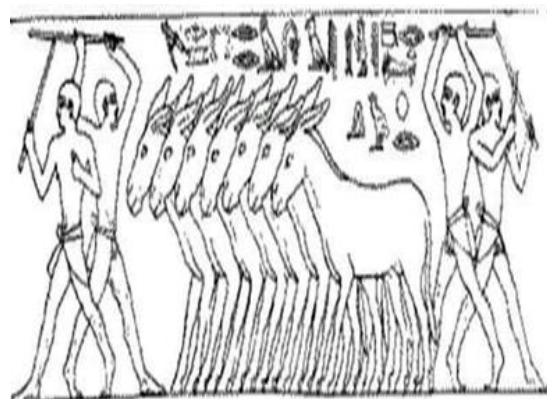
Donkeys and mules did not have an important role in ancient Egyptian religious iconography, and were not symbols of high status, and therefore were not frequently depicted in their art, thus it was highly valued for its ability to carry heavy burden, and depicted in several cases in tombs carrying sheaves, grains in saddle packs, threshing and pulling carts.



Ancient Egyptian relief depicting donkeys. Egyptian Museum, Berlin



Donkeys depicted carrying sheaves, grains in saddle packs



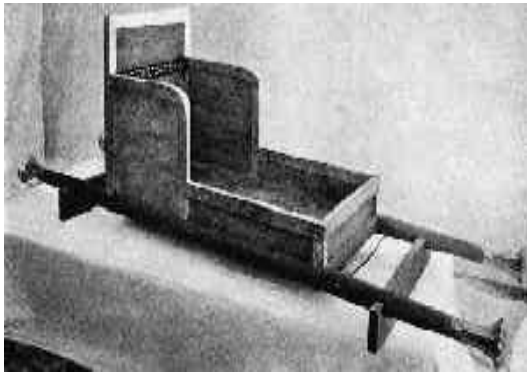
Old Kingdom scene of donkeys driven to the fields and men using sticks to control them, The accompanying inscription translated as follows: One likes him who ascends quickly (to the village), but the sleepy (i.e. lazy) one receives blows, O you who have come to me!
After Hermann Junker, Zu einigen Reden und Rufen auf Grabbildern des alten Reiches



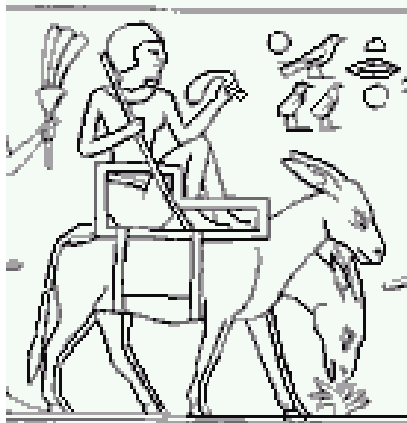
Donkeys also carried ancient Egyptians seated on chairs on its back as a means of transportation where the chair is usually adapted and strapped to the back of the

donkey as a saddle.

G. Reisner in 1923 discovered the tomb of Queen Hetep-heres I, mother of Khufu, which contained a severely damaged carrying-chair which was reconstructed as shown in the photo as an example of chairs carried on men shoulders or on the back of animals such as the donkey.



reconstructed carrying-chair discovered the tomb of Queen Hetep-heres I, mother of Khufu



Urkhu inspecting his fields, Georg Ebers, Aegypten in Bild und Wort, Vol. I, Stuttgart/Leipzig, 1879

In the ancient Egypt it is known that donkeys were not only maintained for work but it is known that donkey milk was hailed as an elixir of long life, a cure for a variety of ailments, and a powerful tonic capable of rejuvenating the skin, thus Cleopatra the famous beautiful

Queen of Ancient Egypt, bathed in donkey milk every day to preserve her beauty and youthful looks, while as reported by the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates mentioning its incredible medicinal properties including liver problems, infectious diseases, fevers, nose bleeds, poisoning, joint pains, and wounds.



Cleopatra VII

It is also necessary to mention that Pliny the Elder (23 – 79 AD) the Roman historian in his “encyclopedia work *Naturalis Historia* volume 28 ” also mentioned that donkey milk has health benefits describing some remedies used as a cure for fatigue, face wrinkles, eye stains, weakened teeth, ulcers, asthma as well as some gynecological problems. In our present time, contemporary analysis proved that donkey milk formula and constituents is the closest known milk to human breast milk containing high lactose ratios, low fat content, rich in vitamins, containing active anti-bacterial agents, thus it has been scientifically confirmed and proved that its anti-bacterial influence and effect is almost 200 times more active than that of usually consumed cow’s milk, and also

is non allergic with natural content of anti-allergens, having great nutritional benefits, with a protein profile makes it more suitable for milk consumers whom are allergic to cow's milk, and it is important to mention that the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation acknowledges all the previously mentioned data concerning donkey milk.

Composition of donkey's, mare's, human and cow's milk (g/100 g) ^[13]				
composition	donkey	mare	human	cow
pH	7.0 – 7.2	7.18	7.0 – 7.5	6.6 – 6.8
Protein g/100g	1.5 – 1.8	1.5 – 2.8	0.9 – 1.7	3.1 – 3.8
Fat g/100g	0.3 – 1.8	0.5 – 2.0	3.5 – 4.0	3.5 – 3.9
Lactose g/100g	5.8 – 7.4	5.8 – 7.0	6.3 – 7.0	4.4 – 4.9
Total Solids (TS) g/100 g	8.8- 11.7	9.3- 11.6	11.7- 12.9	12.5- 13.0
Casein Nitrogen (CN) g/100 g	0.64- 1.03	0.94- 1.2	0.32- 0.42	2.46- 2.80
Whey protein g/100 g	0.49- 0.80	0.74- 0.91	0.68- 0.83	0.55- 0.70
NPN g/100 g	0.18- 0.41	0.17- 0.35	0.26- 0.32	0.1- 0.19
Casein Nitrogen (CN) %	47.28	50	26.06	77.23
Whey protein %	36.96	38.79	53.52	17.54
NPN %	15.76	11.21	20.42	5.23

Comparison between donkey, human and other animals milk and other

Starting from the Middle Kingdom, the donkey has been considered as belonging to Seth the God of evil, where the myth describes that 77 donkeys opposed and prevented the rising of sun god Raa,

accordingly donkeys were treated as an adversary (enemy) of the gods

Ancient Egyptian had several proverbs mentioning the donkey such as:

-Do not tie your donkey's foot to the palm tree lest he shake it.

-The hissing of the snake is more effective than the braying of the donkey.

-The waste of a donkey is carrying bricks.

- One does not praise a donkey carrying a load because it brays.

- If a donkey goes with a horse it adopts its pace.

-One does not load a beam on a donkey.

Ancient Egyptian trade and crop transportation was completely dependent on donkeys until the introduction of camels in the first millennium BC, thus mules which are the offspring resulting from mating of a female horse and a male donkey appeared in depictions, showing that they were used during the New Kingdom.

The earliest skeletal remains thought to be donkeys were identified on the basis of size and archaeological context are dated back to the 5th millennium and the first half of the 4th millennium B.C.

The first discovery of domesticated donkeys in ancient Egypt was belongs to Sir Flinders Petrie's who discovered three donkey skeletons in a First Dynasty tomb at Tarkhan in Egypt (2850 B.C.), other skeletal remains has been excavated and found in other sites such as Maadi where domestic donkeys were recorded at 3500-4000 BP (Midant-Reynes, 1992), also skeletal remains of donkeys has been discovered in the site of Hierakonpolis, all previous discoveries and excavational findings provided certain evidence for the

presence of early donkeys in ancient Egypt and proving their domestication and usage in their daily life.

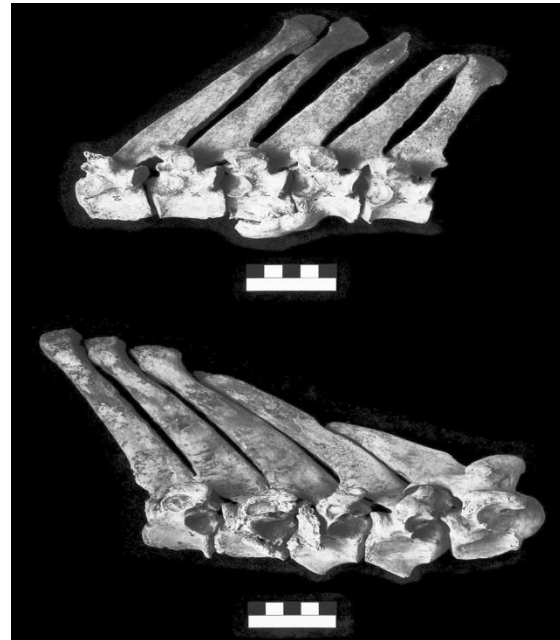
Other Donkey skeletons have been excavated at Abusir area, where three donkey skeletons have been discovered among the contents of a mastaba grave dating to the time of King Den, fourth king of the first dynasty 3000 B.C.



Abydos donkeys buried in brick tombs.

In addition ten donkey skeletons (*Equus asinus*) has been recently discovered in three brick tombs near the mortuary complex of one of the founder dynasty Egyptian kings (ca. 3000B.C.) at Abydos, Egypt represents the earliest donkey skeletons ever found, Abydos is situated in a great embayment of high cliffs that form the western edge of the Nile Valley, it is famous as the burial place of the earliest Egyptian kings and as the cult place of the god Osiris, and is situated about four hundred eighty kilometers south of Cairo, donkeys were found *in situ* in sealed tombs buried in three

contiguous subsidiary grave chambers, in a part of the site known today as the north cemetery, thus the examination of the skeletons proved that the donkeys were prime adults and not aged animals.



Vertebral arthropathies of Abydos donkey skeletons. (Upper) Osteophyt formation. (Lower) Compression remodeling of spine

From the previously mentioned data we Conclude that donkeys has been domesticated in Egypt over 5000 years ago and played an important role in agriculture, transportation and trade, thus their milk was used in medical remedies and cosmetic ingreidents, thus playing no role as one of their popular dieties.

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